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ABSTRACT

There has been a dramatic increase in interest and participation in sports during the past decade, and this increase has affected the college student-athlete. Approximately 10% of American college athletes suffer from problems appropriate for counseling interventions. There is a need for counseling professionals who are sensitive to interventions for student-athletes and who can address the psychoemotional needs of the student-athlete. The digest contrasts the role of the sports counselor with the role of the sports psychologists who is primarily concerned with performance. Counselors involved professionally with student-athletes must recognize the individual and group differences that characterize the athletic population. Women and minorities may differ in their needs to participate in sports and in the issues which arise as a result of their participation. It is emphasized that collegiate atheletes rarely make it to the professional ranks or to the Olympics. The need for career development and life planning is stressed. The digest concludes that effective models and strategies for the implementation of sports counseling are needed. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-04

Sports Counseling: Helping Student-Athletes

J. Scott Hinkle

During the past ten years there has been a dramatic increase in interest and participation in sports at the collegiate, as well as professional and leisure levels. The 1970s and 1980s have brought increased commercialization of sports. Despite the involvement of sanctioning bodies, countless student-athletes are suffering from exploitation, personal excesses, and abuse including drugs and alcohol, as well as exhibiting various psychosocial problems. Approximately ten percent of American college athletes suffer from problems appropriate for counseling. At the collegiate level, many sports programs have become expensive preparatory programs for professional teams. Rarely a day passes without a news report of a student-athlete in some type of psychosocio-behavioral difficulty directly or indirectly associated with sports performance. Student-athletes are subject to emotional difficulties as a function of sports participation. Anxiety resulting from the threat of evaluation by others, lack of self-confidence, and unreasonable expectations from coaches and fans are but a few of the problems experienced by student-athletes. Educational, developmental, and remedial programs are needed for student-athletes. Such programs are not available to all who need them, and programs which include any form of counseling are especially limited.

Counseling Athletes

Referral to sports counselors is becoming more common, resulting in a demand for counseling professionals sensitive to interventions for student athletes. Since sports psychologists focus on performance and coaches typically have physical education training, neither are qualified or prepared to work with individuals psychoemotional difficulties. Counseling professionals are needed to address the psychoemotional needs of the student-athletes.

Counselors are well prepared for the provision of educational and clinical services designed for student-athletes, including lifestyle consultation, developmental programming, career development, and stress management. Direct performance enhancement per se may be out of the realm of most counselors' training. This area is typically best handled by sports psychologists or psychologists with motivational sports training. This is not to infer, however, that counselors' involvement with athletes does not enhance performance. Such enhancement is often indirect and as a result in improvements in areas associated with the counseling process. For example, a student-athlete who overcomes a drug problem as a result of counseling will likely improve relative sport performance. The optimal sports counselor should be familiar with the sport. However, the counselor's interest in sport should not inhibit the helping process. The counselor should not neglect the individual for the sake of sports performance or the organization/team for which the student-athlete performs.

In contrast to sports psychology, sports counseling's focus is on the athlete's development as an individual, including personal and clinical issues associated with sport performance. For example, sports counseling assists student-athletes with reducing stress and anxiety, overcoming fear of failure and success, and burn-out. It also addresses interpersonal issues such as family and marital difficulty. In addition, counseling can assist with problem prevention, coping skills, relaxation training, decision-making, life management and career planning, therapeutic strategies, and crisis intervention. Ineffective attempts to deal with stress can result in the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Timely assessments and treatment by sports counselors can provide student-athletes with educational programs and information about drugs and substance abuse treatment.

Transitional periods are particularly stressful for student-athletes. For example, many high school stars make limited progress on a college team while others have trouble adjusting when their college sports careers are over. Unfortunately, some examples of such phase of life problems are more extreme. Athletes experiencing difficulties with transitions have been known to become clinically depressed and even suicidal. This, sports counseling services sensitive to the magnitude of the effects of sports on student-athletes are crucial.

Relatedly, student-athletes not involved in revenue sports at the collegiate level may suffer from a lack of recognition and the disparity of the college sports system. Crew members, swimmers, runners, gymnasts, wrestlers, triathletes, and others have their share of stress and difficulties that can be alleviated by counseling. As a result, sports counselors apply methods for becoming involved with and providing services for these "least known" athletes. Many of the difficulties experienced by student-athletes will not require unique counseling techniques or therapeutic competencies. However, they do require the development of theoretical models that will increase the knowledge base of sports counseling and related proactive interventions.

In addition, athletes typically are not counseled in a

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vacuum. Coaches, parents, and significant others can learn effective communication skills from sports counselors and how to best serve as influential role models. Coaches can also learn relationship building skills from sports counselors. Similarly, the cultural aspects of student-athletes are important components of the sports counseling process.

Counseling and Athletic Diversity

As with any endeavor, diversity abounds. Counselors involved professionally with student-athletes must recognize the individual and group differences that characterize the athletic population. Women and minorities may differ in their needs to participate in sports and in the issues which arise as a result of their participation. Thus, the process of sports counseling needs to respect their individual needs. Women's sports, women's coaches, male coaches on female teams, and special athletes (e.g., wheelchair) also can benefit from sports counseling services.

Minority athletes also may differ in their motivations to take part in sports. Levels of preparation for sport may differ from one ethnic or other minority group to the next. The academic needs of minority athletes may also be different. For instance, Brown (1978) has referred to the "jock trap" in which athletes become caught at the collegiate level. This trap refers to the athlete who is left without an education after the institution has used the athlete's physical abilities and eligibility. Brown adds that although all types of athletes are affected, it appears that this happens to African-American athletes more often than to others.

Career Counseling and the Student-Athlete

Collegiate athletes rarely make it to the pro ranks or to the Olympics. In fact, the majority do not make it to graduation. This reflects a need for career development and life planning with student-athletes in the early stages of their careers. Student-athletes' career decisions are often postponed due to the intense level of commitment required by their sport participation. Sports counselors have been successful using interventions which focus on development across the lifespan. In these classes, student-athletes are informed and educated about the need for awareness of difficulties that may lie ahead and are taught skills necessary for effective personal problem management. Sports counselors working with student-athletes are sensitive to the need for a wide range of career information. Moreover, sports counselors help student-athletes evaluate their academic performance and its important relationship to achieving athletic goals (Lee, 1983). Planning for athletic retirement can be a frustrating experience if prior considerations for this phase of life have not been addressed. Planning for a second career and transferring athletic skills to life skills are important issues for most student-athletes.

Conclusion

Effective models and strategies for the implementation of sports counseling are needed. Such models should include career life planning, promoting collaboration between physical educators, coaches, and sports counselors, and adopting frequently used counseling formats to sports counseling. Reality therapy, for example, has been demonstrated to be an effective therapeutic modality in sports counseling. A few counselor education programs are currently offering sports counseling courses as an area of interest (e.g., Florida State University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, University of South Carolina, Southern Illinois University, Syracuse University, and Springfield College).

Sports counselors working with student-athletes assist this population with the various aspects of personal development affected by sports performance. Counselors also educate the public about the problems of living associated with athletic involvement. As our colleges and universities continue to utilize and make demands of student athletes and as the recognition of the work performed by sports counselors grows, the need for counselors to work effectively with the psychosocial concerns of the student-athlete will continue to increase.

Resource Documents

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